

The Orthodox Tradition and the Councils of the Church

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This morning I would like us to spend a short time considering the Councils of the Church and their relation to our Orthodox Christian Tradition. There is a limit to what can be said in forty minutes and I will certainly not be describing the details of the hundreds and thousands of councils which have taken place over the history of the Church. Instead we will especially consider what councils are for and how they preserve the Tradition of the Church.

We have been reminded that the Tradition of the Church must not be conceived as simply a collection of doctrines, practices and disciplines which are passed on more or less coherently from generation to generation. Of course these are aspects of the Tradition. But essentially the Tradition is the living, vital and dynamic presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in the Church, and it is this life which Orthodox have consistently sought to guarantee by the careful and deliberate transmission of the Tradition.

On the one hand the Tradition is constant, while on the other the traditions are liable to change in order to preserve the Tradition, the inner life of the Church by the Holy Spirit, in different times and places.

Now it is useful that we have introduced this Education Day by considering the difference between the Tradition and the discrete traditions because we must have a clear understanding as we come to consider the conciliar nature of the Church that what is of greatest and necessary concern is not to preserve every custom and practice, indeed we will see that this has never been the case, but rather to preserve the life of the Church, the interior presence of the Holy Spirit and the unity with Christ, the Head of his own Body, the Church.

If we are able to look beyond the detailed and contingent specifics of the multitude of conciliar events and actions which have taken place, and if we are able to enquire what was the intention of each council in regard to the ever-renewed Tradition itself, then it is often possible to find a continuity even where there are apparent divergences in specific matters. Very often it is the preservation of a practice or discipline which will best safeguard the Tradition, but sometimes a practice or discipline must be modified or allowed to fall into disuse so that the Tradition itself, as life in Christ, is best preserved.

To a great extent the value and meaning of councils in the Church is not simply to form traditions - though certainly the production of conciliar canons was a necessary and important aspect of councils. But to preserve the Tradition - the experience of the divine life in the Church - and to maintain a living continuity with the experience of this divine life through all ages.

Church Councils are by their very nature a gathering together of various leaders and representatives for some common end, the welfare of the Church. Each council builds on that which has already been confirmed by the conciliar activity of past generations without creating something new nor simply repeating what is received. The one Tradition which is received is ever renewed by the continuing conciliar reception in the one Holy Spirit. We see this in the manner in which ecumenical councils deliberately recount and restate the Tradition which they are intending to apply to some new controversy without creating a new Tradition at all. We should not consider only the great and ecumenical councils of the Church, however many we count, when we are thinking of councils. There is sometimes a sense in which ecumenical councils are presented as if they are over and above the Church, or even descend as divine statements without any significant human participation. But they

form part of a continuity of conciliar activity within the Church and far from being divine events in which human bishops have no real significance, they must be considered divine-human events in which both divine grace and human weakness are present.

In the same continuum, each autocephalous Church community, with its own Patriarch or Catholicos manifests this same conciliar nature and routinely calls together all the bishops and metropolitans under the presidency of their Patriarch or Catholicos so that the affairs of the autocephalous Church may be conducted for the good of that community. Even within such large Orthodox Churches there are often Metropolitan councils in which the local bishops under the presidency of some senior bishop in a region will meet together. While at the very heart of the local experience of the Church there is the bishop in his own see surrounded by his council of presbyters. The Church is conciliar from top to bottom and in each case there is a desire to express the unity of the Church by the application of the Tradition of the Church to contemporary difficulties in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The councils do not so much create Tradition as transmit it from generation to generation and apply and explain and extend its scope to new situations, if we understood the Tradition as the living and vital presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church. In such a case the councils are a necessary expression and guarantee of this life rather than an accidental means of changing and developing it. Within our Orthodox Faith we perceive the Tradition to be the same whether we consider it in the first century, or the fourth, or the fourteenth. The various traditions and practices and disciplines might take on different forms, the explanation of teachings might become more complex, but it is the same life which is described, the same Faith, there is nothing new to be said, just the one Tradition explained and described in terms appropriate to the times.

Therefore we can insist that the Church is conciliar. We find this reflected in the Scriptures. A passage such as Hebrews 10:25 says...

And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is.

Or the important teaching of St Paul about the Body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12 reminds us...

For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ.

These are not passages about councils, but they are foundational references to the communal nature of our faith and life in Christ. We are not being saved alone, but belong to each other and must express that unity with one another. In the local congregation this unity was especially manifested by attendance at the local celebration of the Eucharist.

The well-known letters of St Ignatius of Antioch have much to say about the gathering of the congregation around the bishop. In his letter to the Ephesians he writes...

For if I in this brief space of time, have enjoyed such fellowship with your bishop-I mean not of a mere human, but of a spiritual nature-how much more do I reckon you happy who are so joined to him as the Church is to Jesus Christ, and as Jesus Christ is to the Father, that so all things may agree in unity! Let no man deceive himself: if anyone be not within the altar, he is deprived of the bread of God. For if the prayer of one or two possesses such power, how much more that of the bishop and the whole Church! He, therefore, that does not assemble with the Church, has even by this manifested his pride, and condemned himself. For it is written, "God resisteth the proud." Let us be careful, then, not to set ourselves in opposition to the bishop, in order that we may be subject to God.

From the earliest times, even from the Apostolic age, it has been clearly understood that the Church is a community and that we are united with Christ together or not at all. It is

therefore entirely consistent with this view of the Church that conciliarity should become a central aspect of the Tradition, both expressing the unity of the Church in Christ, and preserving this unity for the future.

The earliest council is taken to be that which was held in Jerusalem and which is described in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 15. Paul and Barnabas travelled to Jerusalem...

And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them. But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses. And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter.

It is reported that there was much disputing, and we can imagine that the unity of the early Christian community was threatened. For this reason the leaders of the Church, the Apostles and Presbyters, gathered or assembled together. The outcome of this early council is well known to us. Certain canons or rules were established for convert Gentiles. But I would suggest that the most important outcome was the expression of the unity of the Church in the Holy Spirit which the council represented and the agreement expressed about the nature of the Tradition as it applied to this situation.

After the account of the discussion which took place we read...

Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas;

And the letter which accompanied them, sent from the council added...

It seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men unto you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul... For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things.

We see that from the very beginning of the life of the Church there is conciliarity. It is in the gathering together of those with the ministry of leadership and the pastorhood of the Church in the presence of the Holy Spirit that the Church finds itself fitly joined together and able to express the unity in Christ which belongs to us as those who have been united to him in baptism and the gift of the one Spirit. Without the conciliar nature of the Church expressed through the gathering together and unity of the episcopate our Orthodox Church would essentially be congregational. Each local gathering of Christians would do as it thought best, perhaps communicating with those who thought like them. But in such a case the Tradition of the Church would entirely lose its integrity and coherence. There could not be that necessary discipline which preserves the doctrinal basis of our Orthodox Faith, nor that necessary expression of love and submission to one another which joins together Orthodox Christians into one Body of Christ across space and time.

After the account of the Apostolic Council in Jerusalem we find the first documented councils of bishops, as leaders of various local congregations, in the mid-2nd century, and so roughly at the time when the last of the Apostolic men were falling asleep in the Lord. St Polycarp, for instance, who had been a disciple of the Apostle John, was martyred in about 155 AD and represented one of the last of those who had been a disciple of the Apostles and those who had known the Apostles. Yet even before these earliest councils there was certainly communication between bishops for the common good of the Church.

Just as St Paul had written to the churches which he had established and continued an oversight of them by visits and letters, as well as writing to churches such as that of the Romans even before he had visited them. So it seems that the bishops of the major cities and communities corresponded with each other and offered direction to those congregations

which seemed to be facing difficulties. The letter of St Clement of Rome to the Corinthians is just one such example of a bishop of one city having a sense of shared responsibility for the community in another place. He writes on behalf of the Church in Rome to that which is in Corinth, and makes no apology for doing so, rather wishing that he had been able to respond more quickly to the correspondence which had been sent to Rome by some of the Corinthian congregation.

Likewise in the years before his death we know that St Polycarp travelled to Rome to discuss various matters with Pope Anicetus, and especially the variant traditions of celebrating Pascha which were held in Rome and in Asia Minor. About fifty years earlier he had himself received a letter from St Ignatius of Antioch as he was being taken a captive to Rome and his own martyrdom in which he says...

Since I have not been able to write to all the churches, by reason of my sailing suddenly from Troas to Neapolis, as the Divine will enjoineth, thou shalt write to the churches in front, as one possessing the mind of God, to the intent that they also may do this same thing -- let those who are able send messengers, and the rest letters by the persons who are sent by thee, that ye may be glorified by an ever memorable deed -- for this is worthy of thee.

It is well known that St Ignatius sent letters to many of the churches in Asia Minor, and to Rome, offering advice and exhortations to unity, and when he found himself unable to complete his correspondence he asks St Polycarp to complete it, not as if such correspondence between churches was a novelty or something unusual.

Indeed the familiar churches of Asia Minor, whose names we know well from the letters of St Paul, were not so far distant from each other that there could not be such communication. Papias, the bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor, records how he would question all those who came through his town from Palestine asking them what they had heard from those who knew the Apostles, and those Apostolic men who were still alive in his youth. As far as we can see, there was much communication between Christian congregations and even between Christian leaders from the earliest times.

Hierapolis is only about 8 miles from the New Testament city of Laodicea, and Smyrna is only an hour's drive by car from Ephesus. It is not surprising then that it is in this region of many relatively densely spaced congregations that the first councils of bishops appear to have taken place.

One model for such gatherings must have been the local congregational council of presbyters gathered around their bishop as described by St Ignatius. But the demands of Christian unity must surely have made it clear that in the absence of the Apostles and their close associates, it was the bishops themselves who were responsible not only for the pastoral care of local communities but for expressing and preserving the wider unity of the Christian Church spread throughout regions and countries and indeed the whole world.

The impetus for these first councils was the development of the Montanist movement. In some places, such as North Africa, it seems only to have represented a rigorist movement of Christians encouraging greater holiness and devotion, but in Asia Minor, where these councils took place, it certainly seems to have become a heterodox competitor to Orthodox Christianity. The presence of such a divisive teaching called for the gathering of bishops representing many towns and cities to develop a response that would preserve the unity of the Church and the doctrinal and spiritual Tradition of which they were guarantors.

In a fragment of a work by Apollinaris Claudius, bishop of Hierapolis, where Papias had been bishop a little earlier, and right in the heart of Asia Minor, preserved in Eusebius' Church History, we find it recorded that...

The faithful of Asia, at many times and in many places, came together to consult on the subject of Montanus and his followers; and these new doctrines were examined, and declared strange and impious.

Elsewhere we discover that at least one of these meetings, held at Hierapolis, consisted of 26 bishops as well as Bishop Apollinaris, and these must have represented a significant proportion of the bishops of Christian communities in Asia Minor. The heresy of Montanism was condemned and Montanus and Maximilla, the false prophets of Montanism were convicted of heresy. At about the same time a council is recorded as having taken place at Thrace on the Black Sea under Bishop Sotas of Anchialus, with twelve other bishops taking the same action against Montanism, Montanus himself and Maximilla. We see that the bishops gathered together had examined and considered that which was causing a disturbance to the Church and then gave a judgement together, by this means creating nothing new, but preserving the Tradition as they understood it and had received it.

These very first recorded councils of bishops were clearly occasioned by a present threat to the unity of the Church, and to the integrity of the Apostolic Tradition which the bishops were charged with preserving. There was a practical basis for their taking place, but as in the record of St Polycarp travelling to Rome and meeting with St Anicetus, we should not imagine that bishops were entirely isolated in their pastoral ministry. On the contrary, we can reasonably imagine that local bishops met with each other and corresponded with each other so that these larger formal councils which first appear in the middle of the second century to deal with the challenge of Montanism were a natural outgrowth of such relationships.

Later in the second century there were further councils which were called to try to resolve the issue of the variant calculations of the date of Pascha. A new development seems to have taken place. These first councils were rather spontaneous affairs, and took place on the initiative of local groups of bishops, perhaps under the presidency of the one among them who had the greatest prestige. But in about 196 AD Jerome records that in light of the Quartodeciman controversy about the date of Pascha, Pope Victor of Rome wrote to the leading bishops of various regions asking them to call together councils of local bishops to discuss the matter.

Thus Polycrates, Bishop of Ephesus, and one who must have known St Polycarp, found himself receiving a letter from Pope Victor requesting him to hold a council. He did indeed gather together those bishops within his influence, and it appears that these were a considerable number. They discussed the issue of the date of Pascha but determined to follow the custom which had been passed down to them, believing it to derive from St John who had lived in Ephesus. Eusebius describes this issue and records some of the councils which took place across the Christian world at this time saying...

A question of no small importance arose at that time. For the parishes of all Asia, as from an older tradition, held that the fourteenth day of the moon, on which day the Jews were commanded to sacrifice the lamb, should be observed as the feast of the Saviour's passover. It was therefore necessary to end their fast on that day, whatever day of the week it should happen to be. But it was not the custom of the churches in the rest of the world to end it at this time, as they observed the practice which, from apostolic tradition, has prevailed to the present time, of terminating the fast on no other day than on that of the resurrection of our Saviour.

Synods and assemblies of bishops were held on this account, and all, with one consent, through mutual correspondence drew up an ecclesiastical decree, that the mystery of the resurrection of the Lord should be celebrated on no other but the Lord's Day, and that we should observe the close of the paschal fast on this day only. There is still extant a writing of those who were then assembled in Palestine, over whom Theophilus, bishop of Cæsarea, and Narcissus, bishop of Jerusalem, presided.

And there is also another writing extant of those who were assembled at Rome to consider the same question, which bears the name of Bishop Victor; also of the bishops in Pontus over whom Palmas, as the oldest, presided; and of the parishes in Gaul of which Irenæus was bishop, and of those in Osrhoëne and the cities there; and a personal letter of Bacchylus, bishop of the church at Corinth, and of a great many others, who uttered the same opinion and judgment, and cast the same vote.

And that which has been given above was their unanimous decision.

We can see from this passage that the issue of the date of the calculation of Pascha had now reached such a point of controversy with the growth of the Church that it was necessary that it be considered and resolved for the sake of the unity of the Church. What is important here is that councils were called in response to the matter and took place in many different locations. There was one in Palestine, and one at Rome, another in Pontus, and a further one in Gaul, and even one in Edessa. And it would also seem that in each case there was one or more presidents, and a sense of local bishops and congregations being in a relationship with the senior bishop of their region.

This has happened organically, as it were. There are no canons imposing such a form of conciliarity, and it would have been possible for bishops to ignore the initiative of Pope Victor who proposes these local councils as a means of coming to a universal judgement on the matter. Nevertheless it appears that it was received everywhere as the proper means of dealing with controversy. And even in Asia Minor where the issue was most pressing, there was no objection to calling together as many of the local bishops as possible under the presidency of Polycrates of Ephesus. It was already, in some sense, an expression of the nature of the Church rather than some externally imposed organisational programme that was not essential at all.

Of course the bishops of Asia Minor refused to back down from their own customs and Pope Victor of Rome went so far as to sever communion with them. This action was resisted by St Irenaeus who wrote in the following manner...

But this did not please all the bishops. And they besought him to consider the things of peace, and of neighbourly unity and love. Words of theirs are extant, sharply rebuking Victor. Among them was Irenæus, who, sending letters in the name of the brethren in Gaul over whom he presided, maintained that the mystery of the resurrection of the Lord should be observed only on the Lord's Day. He fittingly admonishes Victor that he should not cut off whole churches of God which observed the tradition of an ancient custom and after many other words he proceeds as follows:

For the controversy is not only concerning the day, but also concerning the very manner of the fast. For some think that they should fast one day, others two, yet others more; some, moreover, count their day as consisting of forty hours day and night. And this variety in its observance has not originated in our time; but long before in that of our ancestors. It is likely that they did not hold to strict accuracy, and thus formed a custom for their posterity according to their own simplicity and peculiar mode. Yet all of these lived none the less in peace, and we also live in peace with one another; and the disagreement in regard to the fast confirms the agreement in the faith.

These are interesting passages which Eusebius preserves. In the first place we can see that regional councils were called in response to particular situations, especially those which were likely to lead to heterodoxy, or disunity among Christians. Whereas these larger gatherings were somewhat of a novelty in the middle of the 2nd century, by the end of the same century they appear to be recognised as the normal and most appropriate means of dealing with such controversies. We can also see that such regional councils were already presided over by the senior bishop, sometimes according to age or length of ministry, but in other places according to the importance of their episcopal location.

We can even see that when there were disagreements it was appropriate for local councils to mediate between those in dispute, and that the senior bishop of a region, such as Irenaeus could write on behalf of the other bishops of Gaul.

St Irenaeus' letter to Pope Victor is especially important because it expresses some aspects of the ministry of bishops in council. He speaks about the fact that the difference in calculating the date of Pascha should not be something which leads to a loss of peace one with another - indicating that being at peace was a necessary aspect of the relation of bishops in communion. But he also says that even where there is a difference in the practice or traditions of fasting which different places had adopted, this variation confirmed the Tradition itself, the life and manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the Church, since all agreed that it was proper to approach the Feast with fasting.

In one sense there is nothing more to say about councils. From almost the earliest times, and just as the last disciples of the Apostles passed away, bishops exercised their ministry of preserving the Tradition and the unity of the Church by meeting in councils to deal with those issues which might disturb the Church. This conciliar nature of the Church is not accidental and merely one of the traditions which can be modified in different times and places, but is considered a central and necessary aspect of the Tradition itself. The activity of the Holy Spirit is present in the conciliar service of the episcopate as a source of Grace and a means of Grace for the sake of the whole Church. The Tradition is expressed authoritatively in each generation according to the contemporary circumstances by the unity in council of the bishops of the Church.

Of course the history of the Church shows us an accelerating pattern of councils from the third century onwards. Even here in the British Isles the Church was organised as congregations gathered around their bishops who met together in council. In 314 AD several British bishops attended a large council of the West held at Arles in Gaul to discuss the Donatist controversy, and they are named as Eborius of York, Restitutus of London and Adelphius, perhaps of Colchester. This council was one of the first in which the Imperial power had a hand, and the Emperor Constantine said of it...

I have assembled a great number of bishops from different and almost innumerable parts of the Empire.

It was to be the beginning of a new relationship with the civil power that was not always to the best advantage of the Church. The ecumenical or Imperial council of Nicaea took place only 11 years after that of Arles in 325 AD with the intention of bringing unity and peace to the Empire, but it was not entirely successful. Just one hundred years later and the ecumenical council of Ephesus equally failed to bring unity, and that of Ephesus in 449 AD and Chalcedon in 451 AD merely illustrated that imperial councils could certainly enforce the will of the civil powers if that were exercised, but could not in themselves bring about peace and unity.

While the succession of councils, and there were a very great many even in these few centuries, produced canons to deal with practical matters, they also issued Definitions or Statements of belief about various controversial doctrinal matters. Nicaea was called to deal with the Arian heresy and though there was agreement found on the wording of the Nicene Creed which gained the support of many, in fact Arianism continued to be an issue for many years. Likewise the council of Ephesus in 431 AD, basing itself on the Nicene expression of the Tradition was called to deal with the controversy around Nestorius, the Archbishop of Constantinople, but though it led to his deposition it hardly resolved the continuing support for the teaching and terminology of Theodore of Mopsuestia which was at the heart of the matter. And the council of Chalcedon, though representing many bishops

with varying agendas and viewpoints, with the Imperial influence always in the background, brought about the first and longest rupture in the communion of those who believe essentially the same even while it also presented itself as being rooted in the expression of the Tradition manifested at Nicaea, Constantinople and Ephesus.

What had happened? St Irenaeus describes the conciliarity of the Church as means of bringing peace and unity in the Faith, but in later periods it can hardly be disputed that they often became a vehicle for party spirits or political ambitions even where the substance of disputes could have been resolved and agreement reached on controversial matters.

There is surely more to a council than that it be held and that it include a variety of bishops. The preservation of the Tradition must require more than that the form be followed even if the Spirit is absent. The history of the Church finds it littered with councils that failed to bring about peace and unity on the basis of the manifestation of the Tradition.

The great St Theodore of Tarsus, was the Syrian archbishop of Canterbury in the late 7th century. When he arrived in England he found the Church in rather a disorganised state. Many sees were vacant, and those bishops present in England often had vast dioceses that were virtually impossible to pastor properly. His first act on reaching England was to call a council.

This council drew together St Theodore with five other bishops, Bisi, Bishop of the East Angles; Wilfrid, Bishop of the Northumbrian people, who was represented by proxies, Putta, Bishop of Rochester; Eleutherius, Bishop of the west Saxons, and Winfrid, Bishop of the province of Mercia.

I refer to this council because in the account which is preserved in the writings of the English Church historian and scholar, Bede, we find justification presented for calling together the bishops of England, as far as was possible. It is interesting to read why St Theodore considered it so important for the council to take place. He says...

It was thought right that we should assemble in accordance with the custom of ancient canons to transact the necessary affairs of the Church.

I wonder if in fact it is St Theodore, with his experience of the well regulated government of the Church in Rome, since he had lived there for many years, who expresses his own desire to see the Church in England equally well ordered. Indeed from what follows in the account it seems clear that he was introducing his own godly ambition for a structured Christian community, even if the other bishops were willing to be guided by him, for Bede continues...

My dearest brothers, for the love and reverence you bear our Redeemer, I beg that we may all deliberate in harmony for our Faith, preserving inviolate the decrees and definitions of our holy and respected Fathers." I then proceeded to speak at length on the need for charity, and the preservation of the Church's unity. And having concluded my discourse, I asked each in turn whether they agreed to observe all the canonical decrees of the ancient Fathers. To which all our fellow-priests replied: "We agree gladly, and we will readily and willingly obey whatever is laid down in the canons of the holy Fathers." I then produced the said book of canons, and publicly showed them ten chapters which I had marked in certain places, because I knew them to be of the greatest importance to us, and I asked that all should devote careful attention to them.

Let me suggest that we can see here the proper relation here between the Tradition which is passed on and the circumstances of each age. St Theodore is moved by the traditions of the Church, the practice of regular assemblies of bishops which he has seen in Syria and in Rome, to call a council in his own time. But it is not with a sterile desire to simply obey a custom or canon. Rather it is with a sense that the difficulties faced by the Church in his own time require the Church in England to be better rooted in the Tradition,

the life of the Church. There had been no such regular and routine national councils of bishops in England. The *necessary affairs of the Church*, as it is described, required conciliar action to be taken.

We might even say that the divine life of the Holy Spirit in the Church has so ordered matters that the *necessary affairs of the Church* are undertaken in council. St Theodore is neither holding a council because he wishes to obey a rule, nor holding a council as something he has recently introduced, but he calls this council because it is the way the divine life in the Church is expressed. The council is called because the experience of 700 years of Church life have determined that this is the manner in which *the necessary affairs of the Church* are managed.

It would be possible to imagine a variety of organisational differences in the manner in which such councils are held. Perhaps in some places they might take place three times a year, and in another just twice a year. These are traditions, as it were, the practices which may change and develop but which do not disturb the essential character of the Tradition itself, which is that councils of bishops must take place, and that the *necessary affairs of the Church* are dealt with in such a context. In fact this very council, while insisting that it would obey what was laid down in the canons then proceeded to breach them by agreeing to meet only once a year in August instead of twice a year as had become customary. I am not going to consider the canons produced at this council, but I believe this indicates that the very gathering of a council of bishops manifests something necessary about the Tradition of the Church. The canon which instructed bishops to meet twice a year was useful and appropriate in many circumstances, but it existed for a higher purpose, and in the case of England in this period it was impossible for bishops to meet so regularly, but it was still possible, even with only one meeting a year, to express that which was most necessary to the life of the Church, that which was the Tradition, even if the traditions were modified. This is entirely how St Irenaeus had considered the issue of the celebration of Pascha. The Tradition might find expression in a variety of ways, but it was still the essential Tradition, the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church.

What is it then about councils that St Theodore thought most important? He says...

I begged that we might all deliberate in harmony for our Faith and I then proceeded to speak at length on the need for charity, and the preservation of the Church's unity.

I would like to suggest that this is the necessary aspect of conciliar activity which creates, preserves and guarantees the Tradition. The harmony expressed by gatherings of bishops in a spirit of love brings about and preserves the unity of the Church in the manifestation of the one Tradition.

Of course there are canons, local and practical decisions made by these six bishops, based on previous canons and modified by their own circumstances. But these are, to a great extent, the outcome or necessary product of the interior character of the council which is harmony in love for the sake of unity in the manifestation of the Christian life. The necessary business and activity of the Church requires that bishops meet in such a context of harmony in love for the sake of unity. Where this does not take place the life of the Church suffers. Certainly the arrival of St Theodore in England brought about a great improvement of the Church through the restoration of the conciliar Tradition. Within a few years there were fourteen bishops instead of only six. In many ways the Church in England as an organised community derives from his episcopacy and the efforts he made to renew the conciliar Tradition in England.

There could easily be a TV programme called *When Councils Go Wrong!* because in the history of the Church it does seem that the fruitfulness of a council, of whatever scope, is

not guaranteed by simply organising it. There are many councils which have made a difficult situation worse. Councils which have failed, for a variety of reasons, to bring about that unity in the Tradition which might have been possible.

But the fact that councils can go wrong is not reason to abandon the conciliar nature of the Church. There are still wonderful examples today of councils expressing the unity of the Church and unity in the experience and manifestation of the Tradition. In 1965 the Churches of the Oriental Orthodox communion held a council in Addis Ababa. The introduction to the texts produced there says...

Although these five Churches have all along recognized one another officially as sister churches holding full Eucharistic fellowship with each other, they have not had a common council or synod after the fifth century. The Addis Ababa Conference has now brought to an end this practical isolation one from another of these Churches and opened up a new age in which they may be expected both to manifest concretely their unity and to play their role together in serving the Christian cause in the modern world.

It seems to me that this expresses perfectly the nature of a true council, since it allowed the manifestation of unity of Faith and Tradition, and the desire for communion in service to the Church and the world.

The great problems which the Church faces today will only be countered with conciliar action in love and humility. Bishops meeting together in such a spirit, in the Holy Spirit, become a gift of unity to the Church and of life to the world. There are divisions between Orthodox Christians which need to be resolved, and it is in council that God has provided the means to such resolution, both within our own Oriental Orthodox communion, and between our communion and others. There are social influences and philosophies which threaten our faithful members, and it is in council together that our bishops will properly address these and come to agreement in the Spirit. There is a need to present a unity to the world of those who belong to Christ, and it is in council that our bishops first and foremost express this unity.

The Orthodox Tradition, the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church, is renewed when bishops meet together in council in unity and love with humility. This expression of unity in Christ is at the heart of the Orthodox Tradition. What councils achieve when they are in accordance with God's will is to manifest that unity which already exists as a divine gift. Everything else is subsidiary to this unity. The creation of disciplinary canons exists to bring about unity in the Tradition. The publication of various statements and doctrinal acts is also to bring about unity in the same Tradition. The gathering of bishops from various places is to practically and spiritually manifest this unity in the one Tradition.

The organic nature of the development of conciliarity in the earliest centuries under the direction of the Holy Spirit should inspire us to be hopeful in this age as in every age. The difficulties which the Church faces can be resolved by the direction of the same Holy Spirit. But it will be by bishops meeting together in charity and humility to discover the will of God for the people of God. That ever renewed expression of the unchanging Tradition manifested for our own times.

May we all prayerfully support our bishops and encourage them in every place we find ourselves as Orthodox Christians to gather together in council for the *necessary affairs of the Church* not only within our own jurisdictions but as bishops of the Church of Christ already gathered together in this place and every other place.